

Chairman Himmelberger and members of the committee for the record my name is Sheena Rice and I am the Campus Organizer for the MontPIRG student chapter at the University of Montana.

The Student PIRGs are the nation's largest student civic engagement organization. Our New Voters Project is the oldest and largest grassroots non partisan effort to mobilize young voters in the country. Since our inception 25 years ago, we have registered millions of young voters, 700,000 since 2004. This election year, 85 PIRG organizers worked in 24 states on 150 campuses across the country running massive voter registration drives that pair on the ground and on line voter registration drives in an effort to ensure the voice of students is heard in election booths across the country.

Background on Student Voting

Young voter participation is essential to our democracy. Making up more than a fifth of the electorate in 2004, millennials born between 1980 and 2000 will make up a third of the electorate by 2015. Because voting habits are established early, the participation of this generation in the political process will lead to a healthier democracy for decades to come. Recognizing the importance of their participation in the political process, in 1972, Americans granted 18-21 year olds the right to vote. For two decades subsequently, youth vote rates decreased, fueled by a 'cycle of mutual neglect' in which political campaigns failed to focus resources on turning out a demographic saddled with low turn out rates. Young people in turn, feeling this neglect, reciprocated with even bigger declines in turnout.

Over the past several election cycles, however, the tide has finally turned. The youth vote is on the rise. Between 2000 and 2004, young voter turnout rates increased by 11 percent, three times the increase among the general population. Between 2002 and 2006, the youth vote increased again by two million votes, while general turnout increased only slightly. Turnout results in 2008 escalated this trend – resulting in 2.2 million more voters since 2004. Visiting campuses and talking with student leaders across the country during the election months, the excitement among the nation's college and university students was palpable.

The reasons for this reversal range from the increased use of technology to an increased allocation of campaign resources across the board toward reaching out to and talking to young voters. While pundits and pollsters will likely debate the sources of this trend for years to come, one factor behind this trend is indisputable: For nearly a decade, experts have documented a rise in the civic engagement culture of young people. Students are volunteering in greater and greater numbers, and over the past several election cycles, this increasing culture of civic engagement has spilled over into the political arena.

Restrictive Voter Identification Laws

As policy-makers, local leaders and higher education institutions look at this trend, we should ask ourselves one question: How do we keep this momentum going? How do we ensure that student voters turn out in bigger numbers this year and for years to come? Despite the importance of resolving this question and continuing this trend, numerous barriers to student voting persist and future barriers such as House Bill 99 are continually presented.

Every state in the country requires its citizens to present proof of or swear to residency in order to cast a ballot. Unfortunately, identification laws that impact students are inconsistent across the country and many states and local registrars try to enforce identification requirements that create unnecessary barriers to student voting. By passing House Bill 99, Montana would be creating this sort of barrier disenfranchising tens of thousands of voters.

To provide an example of the disenfranchisement that exists one need only to look at the state of Indiana. Their voter id law implemented last year, explicitly states that student ID from a private institution may not be used for voting purposes. Drawn from a new state law that requires voters to present Indiana or federal ID at the polls, the law had serious consequences for student voter in the state during the primaries.

In just a few hours a small team of Student PIRG New Voters Project staff, for instance, documented a dozen cases of student voters turned away from the polls for a failure to meet these unnecessarily restrictive ID requirements. At St. Mary's College, a sister school to the University of Notre Dame, for example, two young freshmen arrived at the polls excited to vote for the first time. Both students considered themselves Indiana residents, volunteer their time as tutors at local elementary schools and are members of the campus ministry. Arriving at the polls with an armful of ID on the day of the Indiana primary – birth certificates, county registration cards, school IDs and Illinois driver's licenses – both young women were turned away and were not able to cast a ballot that day.

Indiana's restrictive voter ID law sent a message to those two freshmen that day – your vote is not welcome. The law turned what should have been the first lesson of civic education in a lifetime of citizenship into an exercise of frustration and disenfranchisement. And without reconsideration of these restrictive laws and those across the country, student voters will continue to receive this message over and over again.

In direct contrast, guidance issued by the Elections Division of the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, for example, specifically states that an acceptable form of proof of residence includes a university, college or technical institute identification card that includes a photo. The state does not ask students to overcome any additional hurdles. More importantly, the current identification laws for voting in Montana promote access to voting and changing the law would put up a barrier blocking not only students, but low income and elderly Montanans.

One must also ask themselves what this sort of law would accomplish. Would requiring a state issued id really combat voter fraud? My answer to this is absolutely not. First of all the idea of voter fraud is a myth. An independent audit of Montana's elections in 2006 found absolutely no evidence of voter fraud. The truth is that voter fraud is extremely rare in America, with virtually no evidence of it found anywhere in the country. The bill that is being presented to you today would focus on so called "in person voter fraud" which depends on someone claiming to be someone else at a polling location (and hoping that he/she has not already voted, sent in their ballot absentee, or is already standing in line). At no point has there been evidence of this occurring in Montana, nor anywhere else for that matter.

In conclusion, I'd like to once again thank the committee for the opportunity to testify before you. The good news today is that the youth vote is on the rise and enthusiasm among students for engaging in the political process is bubbling on college campuses across the country. As policy makers and as a society we can take several concrete steps toward removing barriers that prevent students from turning this enthusiasm into true citizenship. To encourage this exciting trend in youth participation in Montana, we must refrain from establishing burdensome voter identification laws that will only accomplish in disenfranchising voters. Montana must welcome all voters not establish barriers. I strongly recommend a do not pass on House Bill 99.